

When traditional festivals are dissonant with social integration

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ABSTRACT

Festivals are an important sector of folk and popular culture. Because of the current importance given to culture and tradition considerable effort has been invested in the maintainance and fostering of such festivals. Nevertheless, as an expression of the past, the world-view which these festivals imply can occasionally collide against current social values, which are directly correlated to the issue of people living together in harmony. In this case, we very often speak from a traditionalism which is clearly based on an acritical and reified view of culture. This particular way of understanding culture may permeate not only traditional folk festivals but also other ones which, according to well-intentioned multiculturalist perspectives, are organized more and more in Western Europe. Although the aim of these festivals is to support social integration, throughout their reified view of culture they may, in fact, contribute toward legitimizing social constructs which tend to strengthen hierarchical differences between autochthonous and immigrants. We are here faced with a paradox which demands a clear and critical stance by anthropologists.

To speak of *folk culture* also involves speaking about tradition. The idea of tradition alludes to the factor of *time* and, therefore, implies a certain continuity of determined cultural elements through history. In fact, tradition is something more than custom. A custom can become a tradition when it takes on an additional positive valuation, a positive valuation because of its continuity in time and also because of meanings people associate with it. Tradition, then, is something *a priori* positively evaluated. That is why we may speak of *good* or *bad customs* but not usually in terms of *good* or *bad traditions*. Tradition implies continuity through time, but not in a static or immovable aspect, given that every tradition must be situated within a continuous process of change and metamorphosis. This process may be revealed at the morphological, semantic and functional levels.

Traditions are undoubtedly important. They are important for the individual and for groups or social collectives as well. For example, an individual can feel the importance of a given tradition by always having the first coffee of the morning with the same cup which was a gift of loved one many years before; such strong feelings can also be experienced on a familiar, village or country level. Traditions help to give historical

sense to identities and they are also structuring because they bring cognitive points of reference which are extremely important for people and collectivities. Perhaps we can dare to think that tradition -and more concretely the sense of tradition- is not only important but even indispensable for the individual; and that without the sense of tradition, no society is possible.

But anthropologists must not restrict themselves to giving an account of or interpreting these traditions; occasionally, it is also necessary to exert cultural critique. There are evident cases in which the practice of determined traditions implies a clash with current social values, such as those cases which involve conflict or even physical violence. We know very well such dramatic cases as the practice in India of *sati* -the immolation of the widow after the husband's death. However, traditional life offers many more examples of practices which may be criticized; some of these can be found in the field of traditional festivals.

Festivals and celebrations offer possibilities for human interaction which we do not find in day to day life. It is evident that festive practices provide an indication of the vital pulse of every society. Yet festivals are not only merely an indicator but can also assume important functions for social dynamization. The idea of *festival* evokes in principle positive associations. At the very least, the thought behind a festival is that participants have fun. They constitute short parentheses in our current working activities. Nevertheless, this does not mean that problems and conflicts which dwell in society cannot very often emerge and be conveyed within the festive frame.

When the Italian anthropologist Vittorio Lanternari stated that the temporary and symbolic annulment of order constitutes one of the characteristics of festivals¹, he was alluding to the fact that these kinds of celebrations presuppose a sort of bracket within daily life. Still, this does not mean that many of the messages which festivals carry cannot have effectiveness beyond the festive frame. This is precisely the case in celebrations because all their meanings and emotional load often imply together, constitute a powerful enculturating and socialization factor. Within these celebrations, interaction micro models for participating social agents are created. Also we may consider that these micro models can have a structuring capacity on the cognitive level and serve as referents regarding the consolidation of similar models for daily life.

¹ Cfr. Vittorio Lanternari, "Spreco, ostentazione, competizione economica. Antropologia del comportamento festivo", in: C. Bianco and M. Del Ninno, *Festa. Antropologia e semiotica* Firenze: Nuova Guarraldi Editrice, 1981, p. 136

We all know very well that festivals do not exclude conflict or even physical violence. Occasionally, this aspect belongs to part of what constitutes the celebration. This is what we denominate *agonale emotion*, taking place in more of the cases within the symbolic realm but sometimes also with real consequences². Although this is a very interesting case for the anthropologist, in this paper I would like to focus the attention on those cases in which we find conflict as the result of values clashing: clashing between those social values which tradition may have conserved through time and the values which belong to our current society, specifically those values which are related to the ideals of a truly fair and egalitarian society.

For the Spanish case, which obviously is the one I know best, it proves not to be very difficult to find examples of festive behavior in which the importance given to tradition leads to clearly conflictive situations within the community where these festivals take place; conflictive situations which have very direct consequences for the life of the community on a daily basis. One of these examples is the *Fiesta de San Marcial*, the main festival of the Basque town of Irún. Among the diverse activities of this celebration one of the most important is the *alarde* -reminiscent of a military parade- in which more than six thousand people march through the town³. Until recently, women could not participate directly in this march because the activity was reserved only for men which was understood as gender discrimination. Hence, not adapting this tradition to current times has led to numerous protests. In addition, there have been many violent incidents because of this. In the last decade, numerous confrontations have taken place in the streets during the festival: on the one side are defenders of the tradition; and on the other side human rights and feminist movements, requiring that women have the opportunity to participate in the parade with the same rights as men. In 1998, the town council of Irún therefore made the decision to organize another *alarde*, in this case with mixed participation -men and women-, which marched in a manner parallel to the exclusively masculine parade.

Another clear example of conflict in current Spanish celebrations is the festival of

² On the symbolic level, we have only to think about, for instance, the fighting between *Moors and Christians* (*Fiestas de Moros y Cristianos*) in several Spanish festivals; or on the real level, those numerous and diverse Spanish bloody traditions which focus on the fighting against a bull (*toro embolado*, *toro ensogado*, etc.) in open spaces of the villages.

³ The *alarde* of Irún has taken place since 1881. In the Basque tradition, the *alardes* are folkloric festivities which are organized in several localities. Regarding this kind of festival see for instance: Juan Antonio Urbeltz, *Alardeak*, Donostia: Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, 1995

La Toma de Granada, which takes place in this Andalusian town every year on January 2nd. This festival commemorates Spain's conquest of Granada from the Moors in 1492. It is not a question of an official or institutional celebration but of a popular festival, which also has its place among the several Andalusian festivals enjoyed not only by insiders but also by foreign visitors. In the different acts comprising this festival, the Spanish army plays a salient role. The celebration contains performances which, besides the fact that they emphasize a clear divisory line between winners and defeated, circumscribe a right-wing symbology. Given all these characteristics and also that people celebrate a historical event which in fact resulted in a veritable ethnic cleansing, detractors of this festival in Granada itself have spoken out. They understand that "the ceremony of the 2nd January does not contribute towards consolidating sentiments in favor of a community life and mutual tolerance on which every town which aspires to progress ought to be founded"⁴. All such protests by certain progressive sectors of Granada's citizenry have been not able, until now, to eliminate a symbology which inescapably must be wounding for the increasingly more numerous community of Maghrebi origin dwelling in the town.

It is clear that in this case of Granada the importance given to tradition proves to be insane. If the anthropologist must be very critical of this kind of festival belonging to tradition, he/she must also be critical in relation to those *multicultural* festivals which are now becoming a tradition in Europe. They intend to contribute toward a better integration of immigrants. Yet in spite of this laudable goal, these festivals can also bring with them collateral negative effects, such as the exoticization of immigrants. Thus, we can also find clashing social values.

Multicultural festivals, which are launched by institutions or non-governmental groups, are taking place more and more frequently in recent years. These initiatives are a consequence of a growing awareness that a pluricultural way of living together for our society needs to be supported. These festivals have a very specific social function: their utility lies in helping to inculcate in people the need for respecting the right of difference in societies, marked by migratory influx. These festivals are different from other ones in that it is not tradition that justifies them but above all, the ideal of determined values of living together respectfully and the conviction that there is a need to build bridges between different collectivities, which are defined by ethnicity criteria. They are festivals,

⁴ Proposal of the group *Manifiesto 2 de Enero* which aims to interchange the festival of *La Toma* in the *fiesta de las culturas* (Cultures Festival). Cfr. F. Javier García Castaño (ed.), *Fiesta, Tradición y Cambio*, Granada: Proyecto Sur de Ediciones, 2000, p. 173

then, which look more to the future than to the past. Nevertheless, -and this is the core of the question- we can also find reification views of tradition; in this case of the tradition which our culture thinks belongs to immigrants.

If on the one side, the principles which multicultural festivals defend are really necessary for our society, on the other side, these festivals, as they are usually conceived, can easily fall into the trap of exoticizing immigrants. Thus, these festivals can give a mixed message. Their message says explicitly that pluricultural coexistence is not only necessary but also positive. Yet implicitly such festivals can also contribute toward reifying ethnocentrically the figure of immigrant.

Thus, for instance, in multicultural festivals that regularly take place in Barcelona, among the different stands are some which literally announce "ethnic food". Today then, we speak not only of *ethnic music* but also of *ethnic dances*, *ethnic dress*, *ethnic hairstyle* and also *ethnic food*. Of all these different combinations, unquestionably it is that of *ethnic music* with which we are more familiar. The label *ethnic music* is usual in music shops, radio programs, festivals, or music critiques appearing in the mass media. But the critique which several specialists have made regarding the label *ethnic music* is also applicable to all other conceivable expressions in which the adjective *ethnic* appears. The term *ethnic* refers not only to the idea of cultural otherness but also to exoticism. We assimilate the musical productions of the so-called *Third World* as ethnic musics, and it is clear that the term *ethnic* applied to music always suggests the existence of superior and inferior forms of musics⁵. Exactly the same happens with the term *folk* as critically stated by Victor Zuckerkandl: "there is a trace of snobbery about the term *folk music* (*Volksmusik*), as when a noble condescends to his inferiors. The term is not simply one of classification; it also expresses a value judgment. Beyond the boundary it establishes lies something lesser, no more than a primitive model, a humble seed, showing no trace of the splendor of the organism when fully developed. Occasional expeditions to this lowly region may turn up valuable finds, and in times of crisis it may lure us into an ephemeral return to nature. But the *real* music, the embodiment of truth and value, lies on this side of the boundary. Here. And only here, in composed masterworks, does music reveal its true essence and full range"⁶.

The use of these adjectives reflects evidently a very concrete manner of

⁵ Keith Swanwick, *Music, mind, and education*, London/New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 103

⁶ Victor Zuckerkandl, *Man the Musician*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976 (1st: 1973), p. 14

understanding the world. When we speak of *multiculturalism*, we are in fact not merely speaking of *cultures in contact* but also of a field of complex narratives, which serve not only to identify one's own group as well as the other one but also to strengthen a hierarchic *status quo* according to those who make the game rules. Mory Kanté, the well-known musician from Guinea today living in Paris, said that, "We have to end with the image of African musicians as bound to tribal music. [...] People speak of African music as ethnic music, but it is also universal music"⁷.

Ethnic music receives an inferior value in comparison to our musical practices, and this axiological component can also be applied to people. According to Charles Hamm, for instance, in South Africa, the fascist apartheid régime was interested in the ethnic music of the black population while American pop music became a symbol for the political opposition⁸. For the former sociopolitical South African system, it would always be better to identify a subordinate group through *ethnic* because, in any case, these musics also have a subordinate role within the musical universe of modern society. This is a trap which is implicit in the philosophy of the multicultural festivals. Multiculturalism, in spite of its good intentions, cannot today be seen with the same ingenuity as when people first began to speak of it, for the following reasons:

1. The multiculturalist ideal implies an essentialist view of culture.
2. Implicitly, the idea of multiculturalism serves to legitimize social constructs, which in fact are used in order to strengthen differences, which are progressively weakened through the current globalization processes. It implies the *existence* of *cultures* from immigrants, which will always be seen according to our particular and biased perspective.
3. Lastly, multiculturalism implies a playing field where the rules are always dictated by and in favor of the team which plays at home, that is to say the autochthonous.

As John Rex wrote, "Very often, however, the rhetoric of an egalitarian multiculturalism conceals the existence of a multiculturalism based upon inequality"⁹.

⁷ M. Rodríguez, *Entrevista a Mory Kanté*, «La Vanguardia», 15.2.1997, p. 45

⁸ Cfr. Umberto Fiori, "Populäre Musik: Theorie, Praxis, Wert", in: Günter Mayer (ed.), *Aufsätze zur Populären Musik*, Berlin: Zyankrise, 1991, p. 133

⁹ Cfr. John Rex, *National Identity in the Democratic Multi-Cultural State*, «Sociological Research Online» 1/2, 1996, URL: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/1/3/1.html>, p. 8 [stand: 2000]

Actually, as Kenan Malik stated, while difference can arise from equality, equality can never result from the difference¹⁰.

We should be especially cautious with respect to the concept of tradition such as it appears in our festivals and celebrations. This concept of tradition must be understood as the direct product of a selection process which is extremely ideologized. The concept of tradition that we associate with our folk festivals or in our attempts to render justice to immigrants by recognizing their right of difference implies some aspects which clearly merit critical examination by the anthropologist:

1. The reductionism, which implies the fact of considering tradition only one part of a larger whole of given cultural elements which are transmitted through generations. These cultural elements are linked to such subjective social values as ruralism, ancestralism, ethnicity or even exoticism.

2. The reification of tradition -as if tradition or culture could exist on the margin of their bearers or social agents. Culture is not an absolute good which has an independent life apart from the people; something which perhaps has to be necessarily conserved, imposed or destroyed in spite of its bearers.

The direct consequence of these aspects is that occasionally we have to speak of a veritable *tyranny of tradition*. This tyranny is manifest, for instance, in those purist views which understand traditional cultural production as something static which must never be changed. However we know today that actually what is normal for every cultural manifestation is that it undergoes changes and modifications as an adaptation process to the different time-space coordinates. The traditions of Irún's festival have to be modified because the implicit values which deny women participation in the parade collide against our current values regarding an egalitarian relationship between genders. The tradition of the *Toma de Granada* celebration must also be changed because the different acts that are performed go directly against minimal norms for a harmonious pluricultural coexistence. Moreover, the importance given to tradition in our multicultural festivals must also be relativized in order to avoid identifying immigrant populations with certain customs and thereby contributing toward strengthening hierarchical differences between autochthonous and immigrant. Thus, as Lila Abu-

¹⁰ Cfr. Kenan Malik, *Universalism and difference: race and the postmodernists*, «Race & Class» 37/3, 1996, p. 4

Lughod, woman from the U.S. who identified herself as a *halfie* (both Arab and American), stated: the assertion of difference conveys an assertion of a hierarchy which always carries within the violence of repression or the ignorance of other forms of difference. She concludes by saying that perhaps anthropologists should take into consideration possible strategies for writing against essentialist views of culture and encourages the underlining of the similarities in all our lives¹¹.

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¹¹ Quoted by Adam Kuper, *Cultura. La versión de los antropólogos*, Barcelona: Paidós, 2001, p. 258

